

[Truelove]

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1 Truelove

Second Selectman James Truelove of Reynolds Bridge, a dignified, urbane old gentleman referred to eulogistically in our weekly paper as a "pillar of the Republican party" came to Thomaston more than thirty years ago from Sheffield, England, Lakeville, Woodbury and other knifemaking towns and established himself immediately among the knifemakers here as a political figure. His obvious educational advantages, an extensive vocabulary from which he selects words of impressive proportions with care and deliberation, and a certain satorial elegance-combined no doubt, to make of the entire knifemaking population an admiring and faithful constituency. Thus Mr. Truelove has represented "The Bridge," in the political affairs of our town almost, it might be said, since the mind of man runneth not to the contrary, though the knifemakers, as a political bloc to be reckoned with by office holders have virtually vanished. His accent, if he ever had one, is no longer noticeable, he has few remaining ties with his homeland, is staunchly American and just as staunchly Republican. Says he: Conn. 1938-9

"To the best of my knowledge, the first knifemaking operations in this country by the Sheffield men began at Waterville about 1844. And this group was bought out by Holly up on Lakeville, the company for which I worked when I first came to this country. I worked in Woodbury and then I got a job over here in Thomaston. It's been a good many years now since I worked at the trade, though I'm still following along same line you might say. You see, I do all the hardening for 2 the Seth Thomas Clock Company nowadays.

"I was a hand forger. That was my job. Learned under my father, and he got it from his father, and so on. For four generations. We were hand forgers for four generations. I had five brothers, and out of the five, four of them learned hand forging too. The other enlisted

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in the army, but entered the knife business when he came back to civilian life. That was the rule in Sheffield in the knifemaking trade. You learned from your father, and what he way was , you were also.

“Yes, it was a difficult job hand forging. Not everyone could learn it. It required quickness—you had to work fast before the steel went below a workable heat—and a certain amount of strength, and good eyesight. The steel wasn't the same as it is now. I think it's safe to say there's been over a hundred different brands of steel developed during the last thirty years, roughly the period I've been in this country.

“I came here when I was thirty years old, already married, brought my family with me. I got tired of the way of life in the old country. There was my father. He lived about a mile and a half from his work. Every day he walked the same old route, along the same old streets, never saw anything different, never got out into the country, came back again at night, went to bed—his father did it before him—his father before him. I said by God I was going to see a little bit more of life than that.

“Sheffield was a big city. Close to three quarters of a million population I believe. Like any manufacturing city, smoky, dirty. I said I was going to see a little country for 3 a change.. There were sixty to eighty different knife companies there. Picture that. Any wonder they could send so many knifemakers over here and not miss them? Jealous[!?] Why, those men were so jealous of the reputations of the companies they worked for, they used to have stand up and drag-out fights every day in the week because of arguments over who made the best knives.

“I didn't go into the shops till I was more than eighteen. Had quite a bit of schooling. But I decided I could do as well at knifemaking as at anything else, so I went in the company where my father worked. Wasn't long—a few years later—I had my own little business. I forged nothing but surgeon's knives—particularly high grade work. Those shops such as I had—where the work was brought to you on contract—were called 'little masters' shops’.

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And by the way—I've seen that sort of work, surgeon's scalpels, offered for sale in the cheaper stores recently for less than I could buy the material for in the old country.

“Worst feature of the knife business was the prohibitive tariffs. There was one company—employed six to eight hundred hands. Ninety per cent of the knives were exported to the United States. And then, I think it was before Cleveland was elected, they put on the big tariff. They reduced the production right away in Sheffield, crippled the industry. The way they did it was to limit the amount of pay a man could make. Not like here. They didn't tell you how many hours you were to work. They told you how much money you could get for a certain amount of work and the hours were up to you. Called it 4 'stinting.' Single men were stinted to \$ 50 ? weekly and married men to five dollars, where some were making as much as ten previously.

“Then Mr. Payne, the president of one of the big companies went to America to study the situation. He said the trend was Democratic and that the tariff would be changed with the next election, but in the meantime they had a to reduce production ten per cent. Called the help in and explained the situation, but he promised them that with the election of a new president in the United States business would pick up. Well, his judgment proved excellent. Inside of six months after the election they returned a twenty per cent cut to the help and were working five and a half days a week. They draw a 10 per cent dividend the second year after the election. That determined my politics right there. I said if I ever came to America I'd be for a protective tariff. That's why I became a Republican.

“But the big competitor with this country was Germany, not England. The Germans produced a knife that was puer pure counterfeit. In plain words it was positively no damn good. They're sold in the quarter and dime stores to this day. I was in Waterbury not long ago and I saw a tray of them. Two men were examining them and one of them got hold of a knife that wouldn't open. After he broke a fingernail on it the girl came over to the counter and asked him what the trouble was. She finally had to take a pair of pliers and open the

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blade. Well, he bought it. Thgouht it had a wonderful spring, I suppose. I felt like asking him why he didn't buy the pliers too.

“But even when I came here the trade was changing. There were only three companies using hand forged blades then. There 5 was the Holly Mfg. Co. in Lakeville, where I first went to work; and Humason and Beckly in New Britain, and the company at Little Valley. I remember up in Lakeville they had a bell they used to ring when it was time to go to work. I had the damndest time trying to get used to it. Never had anything like that in the old country, you see. I was talking in with a lad named Joe Lucas one day and it rang. I said, ‘By God I don't like the idea of that bell.’ He said, ‘I've noticed you don't.’ I said, ‘I don't like it at all—so much so, in fact, that I think I'll just take the day off and go fishing.’ And I did.

“They didn't say anything, at the shop. They were used to Englishmen's ways. You couldn't get away with anything of the sort these days. A workman hasn't any independence any more, nor any pride in his work. I told an official up at the factory just the other day, I said, you give me any kind of steel you want, poorest quality there is, I said, and I'll turn you out a better blade by hand forging than anything on the market today. Of course he was a clock man, he didn't know anything about the knife business, and he said: ‘What are you talking about. Hand forging. Why that's a thing of the past. The next generation won't know what you're talking about.’ Now that was an intelligent argument, wasn't it? The fact remains, pure and simple, that the machine made product is inferior. Here I'll show you —”Mr. Truelove goes out of the room, returns with the inevitable collection of knives.

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“Here, he says, “Here's one of the surgeon's knives I told you about. Made it in the old country.” The blade is about six inches in length, shaped and tempered, but not edged. “This one is kind of a keep sake, one of the first I made. Here's one they called a spear jack, and this one here was called a sleeve board. See the way it's shaped? Just like one of those tailor's boards they used to put in the sleeve of a coat. This one's an ‘equal end.’ Derivation of the name is obvious. And this one's a sportsman's knife. My father carried

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it for years, and it was on him, in fact, when he died. Everything in it was handforged, lining and all. See these instruments? One for taking out slivers—here's a pair of tweezers, another one for taking stones out of a horse's hoof—a corkscrew—a screw driver—a button hook. Lot of those articles you'd never need today.

“Everybody used to carry knives. I do myself, to this day, I never go out without one. My old grandfather used to say if he went out without a knife in his pocket he felt half undressed. He was over eighty years old and still workin' at his trade. He had a little anvil out in a vacant lot and he'd forge stone cutters' tools for them. He'd go to work at two or three in the afternoon and work till supper time. They used to leave the work for him in the morning and came back and get it next morning.

“A venerable appearing old man, my grandfather was. Had long white whiskers and a ruddy face. I remember one time we were finished with a meal and my brother—he was always drawing 7 and sketching—he got out a sheet of paper and he drew my grandfather's head with pencil, from memory mind you, for the old gentleman wasn't there at the time. And everybody said it was a wonderful likeness, which it was. You've heard that knifemakers were artistic, no doubt. That shows there's some truth in it, doesn't it?

“My father's hobby was taxidermy, and he passed it on to me. I work at it to this day, just for pastime, because God knows there isn't much money in it. Some folks bring animals here and never even call for them. Others'll take the finished product and forget to pay. Come in the other room and I'll show you some of my work.”